

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH ENGLISH READING ACTIVITIES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Annotation:

This article examines the development of critical thinking skills through English reading activities in secondary schools in Uzbekistan. In an era where global interconnectedness and information literacy are increasingly vital, fostering critical thinking is essential for students' academic and personal growth. While the Uzbek educational system has embraced reforms focused on learner-centered methodologies, challenges persist in integrating critical thinking into classroom practices. The article explores how English reading lessons, if designed thoughtfully, can serve as a powerful tool for developing critical thinking. By engaging with texts beyond surface comprehension, students can learn to analyze, evaluate, and reflect on the information presented. It emphasizes the role of teachers in creating a classroom environment conducive to inquiry and reflection. Furthermore, the article proposes effective strategies for educators, including open-ended discussions, debates, and comparative analyses, aimed at fostering a more reflective and analytical approach to learning. This research offers practical insights for improving English language instruction and student cognitive engagement in Uzbekistan.

Keywords:

Critical thinking, English reading, secondary schools, Uzbekistan, language education, ELT, learner-centered approach, reading activities, cognitive skills, teacher development.

Introduction

In today's globalized and information-rich world, critical thinking has become a foundational competency in education. As Ennis (1993) describes, it is "reasonable,

reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do.” Critical thinking enables students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information skills that are especially relevant in English language education. In Uzbekistan, educational reforms emphasize communicative competence and the development of 21st-century skills, including critical thinking (Ministry of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2020). However, classroom practices often rely on traditional rote-learning methods, particularly in reading activities, which limits opportunities for deeper intellectual engagement. Scholars like Paul and Elder (2008) emphasize that reading becomes transformative when learners question assumptions, make inferences, and connect texts to broader contexts. English reading activities in secondary schools, when thoughtfully implemented, can promote such higher-order thinking. This article explores how English reading tasks can serve as effective tools for developing critical thinking in the Uzbek secondary education context.

The Importance of Critical Thinking in Education

Critical thinking is a key educational objective essential for fostering independent and reflective learners. It entails the ability to interpret, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information for informed decision-making (Facione, 1990). According to Brookfield (2012), the purpose of critical thinking in education is not just to accumulate knowledge but to question assumptions and explore alternative viewpoints. In the context of English language learning, critical thinking promotes deeper understanding and encourages learners to engage with texts actively, rather than passively absorbing information. Paul and Elder (2008) argue that critical thinking cultivates intellectual standards such as clarity, accuracy, and relevance, which are vital in all subject areas. Furthermore, Halpern (2014) emphasizes that the development of critical thinking skills is linked to lifelong learning and democratic citizenship. In Uzbekistan, where the education system is evolving to meet global standards, embedding critical thinking into language curricula is essential for preparing students for the demands of modern life. When effectively integrated into classroom practice, critical thinking enhances both linguistic competence and cognitive flexibility.

English Reading as a Tool for Critical Thinking

English reading activities present a valuable opportunity for developing critical thinking. Texts ranging from fiction and news articles to opinion essays and biographies can provoke discussion, comparison, and reflection. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), reading comprehension at higher levels involves interpretation, evaluation, and inference-making, all of which support critical thinking development. By asking students to interpret characters' motivations, evaluate arguments, or relate content to real-life issues, educators can stimulate higher-order thinking.

Examples of reading tasks that promote critical thinking include:

- Making predictions before and during reading
- Discussing alternative endings or outcomes
- Comparing themes across different texts
- Reflecting on moral dilemmas or social issues presented in the reading material

Current Practices and Challenges in Uzbekistan

Despite curricular reforms, many English reading activities in Uzbek secondary schools remain limited to factual recall or translation exercises. This is often due to:

- Lack of access to authentic and diverse reading materials
- Insufficient teacher training on critical thinking pedagogy
- Overemphasis on test preparation and textbook-driven instruction

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) underlines the importance of guided learning to help students reach higher cognitive levels. Without proper scaffolding and support, students are unlikely to progress beyond surface-level understanding.

Strategies for Integrating Critical Thinking into Reading Activities

To create reading lessons that support critical thinking, educators can adopt the following strategies:

1. **Use Open-Ended Questions:** Encourage students to explore different interpretations of the text. Questions such as "Why do you think the character acted this way?" or "What would you have done differently?" invite analysis and reflection. Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) supports the use of higher-order questioning to promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
2. **Encourage Debates and Discussions:** After reading, organize debates or group discussions on themes or moral dilemmas in the text. This helps students articulate their opinions and consider opposing views. Research by Mercer and Littleton (2007) shows that dialogic teaching enhances reasoning and critical engagement.
3. **Incorporate Comparative Texts:** Use multiple readings with similar themes or contrasting perspectives. Ask students to compare and critique the ideas presented.
4. **Critical Reflection Journals:** Have students write personal reflections after reading to connect the content to their own experiences or societal issues.
5. **Project-Based Tasks:** Assign creative tasks such as writing an alternative ending, designing a character's diary, or conducting a mock interview based on the text. Project-based learning encourages collaboration and deeper engagement (Thomas, 2000).

The Role of Teachers and Professional Development

Teachers are central to fostering a classroom environment where critical thinking can thrive. Continuous professional development is essential to equip teachers with:

- Techniques for crafting higher-order questions
- Strategies for facilitating meaningful discussions
- Skills for selecting and adapting reading materials

According to Freeman and Johnson (1998), teacher education must be grounded in classroom realities and tailored to specific teaching contexts. Workshops, peer collaboration, and exposure to international best practices can empower Uzbek teachers to transform their classrooms into spaces of inquiry and critical engagement.

Conclusion

The integration of critical thinking into English reading activities is essential for cultivating thoughtful, independent learners in Uzbekistan's secondary schools. As educational systems worldwide shift toward student-centered learning, Uzbekistan's curriculum reforms present a timely opportunity to reimagine reading classes as platforms for inquiry and reflection. Through well-structured reading tasks such as open-ended discussions, reflective journaling, and text comparisons students can be guided to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information. This not only enhances their English proficiency but also prepares them to be active, responsible participants in a knowledge-driven society (Halpern, 2014; Brookfield, 2012). The effectiveness of such practices, however, depends on ongoing teacher training, access to diverse and authentic materials, and institutional support. As Paul and Elder (2008) assert, fostering a culture of critical thinking requires more than isolated activities it requires a systemic shift in pedagogy and mindset. If implemented thoughtfully, these strategies can transform English classrooms into dynamic learning spaces where critical thinking becomes an everyday habit, not an occasional goal.

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